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A QUESTION OF EMPHASIS¹

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The history of classical studies for the last century exhibits a constant fluctuation in the degree of interest accorded by teachers and scholars to various provinces of the subject. At one time it is text criticism that receives the emphasis, at another the encyclopedic study of ancient life, at another syntax, or archaeology, or history, or religion. This shifting of interest is often not a matter of progress in time; it may be determined by the personality of some great teacher or by the place where the study is pursued. In any case it is the business of the critic of method to raise a warning finger when emphasis seems to rest too long or too heavily upon a single division of a wide field.

As in university teaching and research, so also in the pedagogic problems of the high school and the junior college a similar fluctuation is to be observed. At one time or place, or under the influence of one energetic teacher, the interest may be in accurate grammatical analysis, or improved terminology; elsewhere, in the direct method, in "the Latin in English," and so on. And there is the same need of an occasional warning against overdoing a good thing. Such a warning needs neither special learning nor special pedagogic genius to set it forth; and as befits a subject which has to do simply with the exercise of common sense, what I have to say will be briefly and plainly presented.

It seems to me that just now we may be in danger of laying too much emphasis in school and college teaching upon what we may call the externals of Greek and Roman life. We are constantly being told that something must be done to "vitalize" the study of the classic authors, not only by illustrating them with archaeological material, but also by bringing the life of the ancient world visibly

¹ Read before the meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Louisville, April, 1917.

and tangibly into the life of the young student. Hence, in our high schools and to some extent in the colleges, great attention is paid to the reconstruction of the details of ancient life and custom. Roman weddings are celebrated on every hand; Latin plays, or playlets, are presented; Greek plays are occasionally attempted, either in translation or in the original. Our teachers grow great in their knowledge of draperies, ornaments, archaeological details, and the minutiae of ancient costume.

I am convinced that the value of this work has been too highly estimated by some teachers because of a certain misapprehension, and that much of the effort expended upon such work, however praiseworthy the motives behind it, may even interfere with more important objects of classical study.

Before developing this criticism, I wish to protest in advance against a possible misunderstanding of my purpose. I do not wish to be understood as holding that archaeological exercises, or even amateur dramatic performances are useless. Those who carry them out are our friends and are serving the cause of the classics with hearty good will; and assuredly at the present stage of classical studies there should be no quarreling among friends. So far as our own university is concerned, we hope to increase rather than diminish the amount of attention given to archaeological subjects. New courses in this field are to be offered next year; and as for public exercises, we have recently produced a Greek play which represented a great deal of work, not only on the part of the Classical Club, under whose auspices it appeared, but also on the part of all the members of the Greek department and several of their colleagues in Latin, who generously collaborated in the undertaking. I trust that this caveat will protect me against personal arguments; the more so when I affirm that our performance of the *Iphigenia*, in spite of some great difficulties with which it had to contend, surprised and delighted me by the added clearness which it lent to my mental picture of a Greek drama.

Why, then, do I deem it necessary to raise this question of emphasis? First, because the overvaluing of so-called "visualizing" methods is due to a misapprehension, which, if suffered to persist, will prove pernicious to the cause of classical studies. The

life of a people, after all, is expressed in its highest terms through their thoughts; and the best thoughts of the Greeks and Romans remain in the medium of written language, not in stately temples and sculptured marbles, nor in the fascinating and ever-interesting drawings on Greek pottery and Pompeian walls. In place of saying that the study of antiquities and practice with archaeological apparatus vitalize the literature of the ancients, we ought rather to remember that it is Greek and Roman thought expressed in Greek and Roman literature which gives life to the dead remains of their material civilization. From the tombs and temples of Egypt, from the palaces of Mesopotamia, the investigator can reconstruct a marvelously complete picture of Egyptian or Babylonian or Assyrian daily life and pursuits in peace or war—a picture possibly excelling in richness of detail all that archaeology tells us of Greek life. But the life of Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria can never be so real to us as the life of the Greeks, simply because the literary remains of these peoples are not to be compared in variety or depth or artistic value with the literature of the Greeks. One may stand admiring and amazed before the monuments of ancient Peruvian civilization, such as the lonely and impressive city of Machu Picchu. And yet the life of the Incas can never be truly vital to us for the reason that they have left no literature to breathe the spirit of life into their monuments.

The case is different, of course, when our “vitalizers” and “visualizers” address themselves, not merely to the study and exhibition of material objects, but to a dramatic performance where word and act, setting and costume, combine in one effect. But here also it is never to be forgotten that it is the thought that makes the drama, and that the word is the primary vehicle of the thought. In so far as the thought is worthy and the word is worthily delivered and understood, a dramatic performance serves the cause of classical study; but when the attention of spectators and participants is allowed to attach itself to temple or altar, to toga or himation, to shield or javelin rather than to the thought of the playwright, to just that extent does the performance lead away from, rather than toward, the goal of our endeavors.

It should never be forgotten that if we lay too great emphasis in our teaching upon the visible and tangible we are likely to play directly into the hands of our enemies. Not classical teachers only, but all who have to do with literary studies have had reason to complain of a tendency of our times to value only what can be weighed, measured, or counted. Whenever a classical teacher lays undue emphasis upon those features of his subject which can be appreciated by the senses, he directly, no matter how innocently, strengthens the hands of the Philistines.

Much could be said about the question whether dramatic and other "visualizing" programs really produce good results in proportion to the efforts expended on them. This is, however, a matter that ought to be left to the discretion of the teacher. If he—or she—will remember that visualizing programs are no panacea for our troubles, and will count the cost of the undertaking, no harm can be done and much good may be accomplished. But the teacher working in a school where only meager resources are available for models, costumes, staging, and the like, should resolutely refuse to strain apparatus and personnel for what will probably prove incommensurate results. And even in those fortunate schools and colleges where resources are plentiful it should be remembered that in an ambitious dramatic performance there are disturbing, disorganizing effects upon the regular work which are by no means to be ignored.

After all, successful teaching is not and never has been dependent upon material and apparatus, nor upon the skill of the archaeological reconstructor or the theatrical manager. Of the great school-teachers that I have known, two stand out particularly—John M. Webb, of Bell Buckle, Tennessee, and Judson Pattengill, of Ann Arbor; and neither would have shone as a "visualizer" according to some recent notions. The vitality of their teaching was rooted in high character, in broad and deep reading, and in a vivid, constructive imagination playing upon every sentence that they interpreted for their pupils. And outside of the teaching profession the strongest friend of classical studies that I know is a St. Louis lawyer who never saw a classical play and who got his Greek and

Latin in some homely classrooms where the only ornaments were a few battered wall-maps.

When I think of the qualities that made teachers of the great type, I am led to make a criticism—the only serious one that I feel obliged to utter—upon the mental habits of many teachers of today. I take it that in the complexity of their lives and in the demands made upon them by administrative routine the high-school teacher, the college instructor, and the university professor are nowadays much alike. But—I say it with due caution—I fear that many school-teachers do not realize as clearly as their colleagues in the colleges how necessary it is constantly to read and re-read Greek and Latin literature in, around, and beyond the ground covered by actual instruction. They have time to study and discuss new methods and to labor over “platform stunts” and other appeals to the eye and ear; but many of them do not find time to extend and improve their knowledge of the thoughts of the Greeks and the Romans, and still less do they make it their habit to bring every year more and more of ancient literature into their classrooms.

It may be true that in time past college-entrance requirements have held the schools down to a cut-and-dried routine; but that condition has changed. It is true also that good selections for reading in schools—selections of choice bits from works which, as a whole, are not suitable for immature students—are not numerous and often not very workable. But I know of a young college instructor who, like many others in these days, has to teach elementary Greek. When he wants to vary the program of reading in the *Anabasis*, he copies and manifolds a lively bit from Lucian, or an epigram or two from the *Anthology*, or a fable of Aesop, and shows his class another side of the literature. This sort of thing can be done with corresponding material, and with equal or greater ease, for Latin students. It requires a minimum of apparatus and expense. But it does require a knowledge of ancient authors, and it requires also an appreciation of the fact that real “vitalizing” depends primarily upon the richness and vitality of the teacher’s mind. A teacher who takes this hint to heart and improves upon it—which it would be easy enough to do—will in the end do more

for the minds of his pupils and, incidentally, for the cause of classical study than our friends who labor over togas and sandals.

In closing I wish particularly to say a word of comfort to the outnumbered men among our classical teachers. It is likely enough that, when the cry "vitalize your classics" suggests to a sturdy male the idea of fussing over draperies and ribbons for a dramatic representation, he may think that he has made a bad blunder in the choice of his profession. And yet it is very desirable that we continue to keep men in classical work—and I mean men of the athletic, not the aesthetic, type. I think that the cause of the classics would be helped rather than hurt if as we went about the schools we saw more men with thick necks and big hands. Now it is hardly to be expected that men of this sort should give themselves up with great zest or great ease to the neat, minute work of staging a Greek play or a Roman nuptial celebration. In fact, it is my humble opinion that if there be men who really enjoy this particular kind of "vitalizing" they must be akin to that Epeius who, as Plato tells us, in his next incarnation chose the life of a woman skilled in handicrafts. Let our heavy-handed men take courage. If they have the brains and the determination to learn more of the ancient authors and wisely to introduce more of Greek and Roman thought to their pupils, they will have vitalized their subject far more genuinely than those who delight their audience of fathers and mothers with dramatic representations in which Jane and Mary shine as Roman brides or Greek heroines.